



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Region 2
3201 Spurgin Road
Missoula, MT 59804
May 9, 2016

Dear Interested Citizens:

Thank you for your thoughtful reviews and comments on a proposal by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) to purchase approximately 23 acres of private land located just south of Woodworth Road (southeast of the town of Seeley Lake in Missoula County) and adjacent to FWP's Blackfoot Clearwater Wildlife Management Area. The proposal's purpose is to protect wetlands and a travel corridor for wildlife, block up the northern boundary of the WMA, and enhance compatible recreational opportunities and access for the public.

Enclosed is a decision document in which FWP explains its rationale for recommending that the Fish & Wildlife Commission and the State Board of Land Commissioners approve this transaction as proposed. Upon completion of the public involvement process and by including this Decision Notice, FWP accepts the draft environmental assessment (EA) as final. The decision document also summarizes public comment on the proposed acquisition, and explains how FWP considered and incorporated this comment in formulating a recommendation.

FWP will request approval for the purchase of the subject lands at the monthly Fish & Wildlife Commission meeting scheduled for June 7, 2017, in Kalispell. FWP will also request approval from the State Board of Land Commissioners at its regularly scheduled meeting on June 19, 2017 in Helena. These meetings are open to the public, as are other regularly scheduled Commission and Land Board meetings.

Please feel free to contact me at 406-542-5500 with any questions you may have. Thank you for your interest and participation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Randy Arnold', written in a cursive style.

Randy Arnold
Regional Supervisor

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DECISION NOTICE for the Draft EA:
Proposed Willard Addition to the
Blackfoot Clearwater Wildlife Management Area

January 11, 2016

Proposal

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes (the “Proposed Action” Alternative) to purchase the approximately 23-acre property (hereafter, Willard Addition) from the private Willard and Shoquist Family Trust.

If approved, the Willard Addition would be added to FWP’s existing Blackfoot Clearwater Wildlife Management Area (BCWMA) and would block up the north boundary of the WMA along Woodworth Road. The location of the private property, surrounded by BCWMA, Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation (DNRC), and U.S. Forest Service land gives the parcel high value for wildlife habitat and connectivity. Wildlife management goals on the surrounding land are primarily for elk and deer winter range, and for grizzly bear, Canada lynx, and other forest carnivores. The Willard Addition sits within one of the most biologically diverse areas in the state.

The BCWMA provides critical winter range for approximately 1000 elk that migrate to and from higher-elevation summer ranges in the surrounding mountains. Many of these elk migrate from the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area through the Willard Addition onto the BCWMA. Mule deer and white-tailed deer use the Willard Addition and surrounding BCWMA year-round, and the area produces one of the best whitetail deer harvests in FWP’s Region 2 area.

In addition to the importance for elk migration to the BCWMA the Willard Addition also experiences regular use by grizzly bears traveling through the area. Radio-collared research and management bears have been documented in the area and continue to use the wetlands on the Addition for forage and cover.

Multiple game, nongame, furbearing, and threatened species would benefit from the purchase of the Willard Addition. Per the Statewide Wildlife Action Plan¹ (SWAP), the Willard Addition is associated with two Tier 1 Community Types of Greatest Conservation Need: 1) Conifer-dominated Forest and Woodland (xeric-mesic), and 2) Wetlands.

The appraised value and purchase cost is \$200,000. This proposal would remove a partial inholding along the northern boundary of core BCWMA and reduce potential conflicts for the Willard and Shoquist Family Trust by creating an easily definable ownership boundary along Woodworth Road, which also helps ensure the integrity of this part of the WMA is maintained.

FWP developed a Draft Management Plan for the Willard Addition, to direct FWP management of the WMA and guide public use.

¹ Montana’s State Wildlife Action Plan. 2015. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, 1420 East Sixth Avenue, Helena, Montana 59620-0701. 441 pp. Available online (accessed 4 April 2017)
<http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/conservationInAction/swap2015Plan.html>

Under the “No Action” Alternative, FWP would not acquire the approximately 23-acre property. If the Willard and Shoquist Family Trust retained the property or sold it to another buyer, the future impacts to resources and public access would be dependent on the desires of the property’s owner(s). The property could be subject to the potential (sub)division and/or development of the land as residential or recreational housing or properties. This would increase the probability that habitat function would be compromised, as land uses would differ by owner.

Public Review Process

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of its proposed actions to the human and physical environments, evaluate those impacts through an interdisciplinary approach, including public input, and make a decision based on this information. FWP released a draft environmental assessment (EA; “Proposed Willard Addition to the Blackfoot Clearwater Wildlife Management Area”) for public review of this proposal on March 3, 2017 and accepted public comment until April 3, 2017.

Legal notices of the proposed addition and its Draft EA availability were published in the following newspapers (dates): *Independent Record* (Helena; March 3 & 10), *Missoulian* (March 3 & 10), and *Seeley Swan Pathfinder* (March 2 & 9).

FWP mailed 9 copies of the EA, and emailed approximately 50 notifications of the EA’s availability, to adjacent landowners and interested individuals, groups and non-FWP agencies. The EA was available for public review and comment for 32 days on FWP’s web site (<http://fwp.mt.gov/>, “Public Notices”) beginning March 3 through April 3, 2017².

A public hearing to explain the project, answer questions and take public comment was held in Seeley Lake on March 15 (Wednesday) at 6:00 p.m. at the Seeley Lake Community Center (east side of MT Highway 83, immediately north of the town of Seeley Lake).

Public Comment

Public Comment

FWP received one (1) emailed comment, which was from the Missoula County Community and Planning Service (CAPS; Kali Becher, Natural Resource Specialist). The CAPS comments expressed “Missoula County’s support of the proposed acquisition,” and stated, “it will benefit Missoula County residents and will support wildlife habitat and connectivity.” CAPS also noted:

The Seeley Lake Regional Plan, adopted in 2011, contains many goals that align with this addition to the BCWMA. The Plan specifically identifies the importance of protecting natural resources and their functions, values, and connectivity to the larger ecoregion, promoting conservation of significant habitat through public acquisition in order to protect and enhance habitat, and maintaining connectivity among large blocks of habitat. In addition, Missoula County has invested resources in this area through community

² The EA (accessed 4 April 2017) is posted online on FWP’s website at http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicNotices/environmentalAssessments/acquisitionsTradesAndLeases/pn_0197.html

planning and the use of 2006 Open Space Bond funding to assist private land conservation and protect wildlife habitat and connectivity.

Public Hearing

No members of the public showed up to attend the public hearing.

Decision and Recommendation

Based upon the Draft Environmental Assessment and the applicable laws, regulations, and policies, I have determined that the proposed action will not have negative effects on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the EA is the appropriate level of analysis and the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is unnecessary.

This proposal for FWP to purchase the approximately 23-acre Willard property and add it to the Blackfoot Clearwater WMA received support during the public review period. The supporter noted that "Purchase of the property . . . will result in a more clear ownership arrangement and management consistent with the adjacent BCWMA, as well as additional public access." And that the Willard acquisition would align with goals set forth in Missoula County's Seeley Lake Regional Plan.

In consideration of these facts and with the addition of this Decision Notice, I adopt the Draft EA as final. Therefore, I am pleased to recommend to the Fish & Wildlife Commission (at its regularly scheduled June 7, 2017 meeting in Kalispell) that it approve the proposed purchase of this approximately 23-acre property and its addition to the BCWMA.



Randy Arnold
Region 2 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

5/9/2017

Date